



Action research with South African grandmother activists in the aftermath of apartheid and in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic

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Summary

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has devastated traditional family structures around the world. In the township of Khayelitsha, high HIV/AIDS infection rates and subsequent deaths have claimed a generation of parental-aged citizens, often leaving elderly women as sole guardians of their grandchildren. When grandmothers take on the dual leading roles as family caretakers and public health educators, their HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention efforts and their contributions to the development of a healthy society often go unrecognized. In this research, the social restructuring caused by HIV/AIDS and its impact on elder women is illuminated as a critical consequence of the global pandemic. Through

grassroots efforts, the Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS (GAPA) civil society of South Africa dispel myths and break the taboos and social norms around sexual education.

The panel will discuss three action research projects that have emerged from the Service-Learning and Community Engagement (SLCE) partnership between faculty and students of American University and Old Dominion University and GAPA:

1. The first project draws from ethnographic, organizational, and interview data collected during annual SLCE trips from 2008-2011. The project explores the dual forms of trauma exposed in grandmothers' accounts of their responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. These narratives provide the lived experiences of women who both witnessed apartheid and bear the immediate brunt of South Africa's most devastating and contemporary form of structural violence.
2. A second project offers a qualitative analysis of interview data collected from the GAPA women and explores the "grandmother" role within the larger structure of HIV/AIDS, poverty, and human security within the national context of ongoing democratic and socioeconomic development processes.
3. In an effort to model HIV/AIDS activism as a tool for community prevention, a third quantitative project complements the preceding qualitative projects to examine how agent-based modeling can serve as a unique analysis tool to understand how grassroots activism can combat taboos and social norms surrounding HIV/AIDS.

References

Stringer, E. T. (2007). *Action research* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.